

Small businesses must be priority for Legislature

House Speaker John Richardson is right: If Maine is going to improve its economy and job climate, it is going to do it "largely from within."

To make that happen, the state must do more for small businesses, which comprise 97 percent of Maine's employers and provide jobs for more than six out of 10 workers.

Those same small businesses — with 100 employees or fewer — are responsible for almost three-quarters of the new jobs being created in Maine.

Richardson, of Brunswick, is among a group of 16 Democratic lawmakers who have formed the Small Business Initiative. The group has prepared 14 bills aimed at reducing bureaucratic obstacles, urging state agencies to be more helpful to small businesses and creating an atmosphere in Maine that encourages and nurtures entrepreneurship.

Richardson and other lawmakers understand that most of the growth in Maine's employment picture will come from new small businesses — many that are home-based — and from existing ventures that add workers.

The state can play a large role in helping those businesses develop and, in some cases, become bigger.

The Small Business Initiative is an important effort that is long in coming.

Surprisingly, a state that relies extensively on so many small businesses has never established goals, policies and programs aimed at those businesses.

Unveiled Thursday, the bills fall into two major categories:

- Creation of an environment that does more to help small businesses succeed and grow.

- Getting state agencies to do more for small businesses that often face barriers on the road to success, especially in their early years.

Richardson and the other lawmakers are working from a sensible, comprehensive strategy that involves economic support and incentives, education and worker recruitment.

One innovative component seeks to create an "entrepreneurship curriculum" that would teach students from kindergarten to college about ways to create successful businesses.

Another bill would create a college-loan repayment program to help graduates who work in professions for which workers are lacking in Maine.

The program takes aim at one of the most pressing issues in Maine's employment picture: the flight of younger workers, especially from central and northern Maine, to southern Maine or other states offering better-paying jobs.

A program that helps students pay off some or all of their loans would provide compelling reasons for young people, including recent college graduates, to stay and work in Maine — even for wages that might be a bit lower.

Other bills in the package would:

Businesses with fewer than 100 employees comprise 97 percent of Maine's employers and provide jobs for more than six out of 10 workers.

- Establish a new court system dedicated to the quick resolution of disputes between businesses or businesses and consumers. This would cost about \$1 million a year, a good use of the money.

- Require state agencies to inform Maine-based small businesses when state contracts are up for bid.

- Establish a "311" business help line that would work statewide.

- Create entrepreneurship internships for high school and college students.

Each of these makes good sense as Maine works to erase the perception here and across the nation that it is unfriendly to business.

Another bill, which we support, seeks to create the position of small business ombudsman. That person would help businesses understand state laws and regulations, and assist businesses in their dealings with governmental agencies.

Likewise, it is good to see lawmakers finally making appointments to the Maine Regulatory Fairness Board. Although it was established years ago to help improve the state's business climate, no one has ever been named to the board.

Such inattention to important details fuels the perception that Maine is anti-business.

Some of the bills drafted by the Small Business Initiative call for significant borrowing, which will be — and should be — tougher to sell.

One lawmaker seeks a \$50 million bond to boost loan programs for Mainers going to college.

Another has proposed a \$5 million bond to add to the Small Business Growth Fund, with \$1 million of it being used to help companies launch products that have gone through research and development and are ready to be marketed.

That last stage often becomes a financial hurdle for small businesses.

While legitimate ideas, the bills that require large borrowing demand the Legislature's thorough scrutiny.

Overall, Richardson and his group have proposed many forward-thinking ideas that would improve — and, thus, prove — the state's commitment to small business.